

ADDRESS
OF
HON. JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE,

VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES,

PRECEDING THE

Removal of the Senate

FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW CHAMBER:

Delivered in the Senate of the United States,

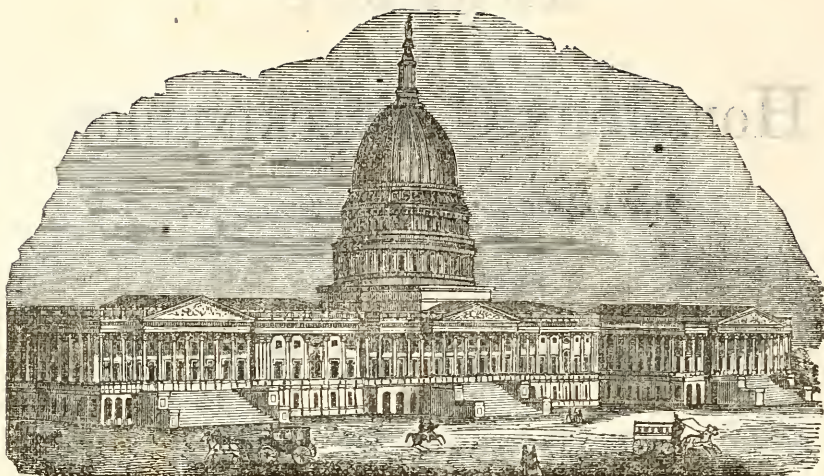
January 4, 1859.



WASHINGTON CITY:

ISSUED BY THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1860.



CAPITOL OF THE UNITED STATES.

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Address of the Vice President.

THE Report of the Special Committee appointed to make arrangements for the Removal of the Senate from the Old to the New Chamber, having been read and adopted—

The VICE PRESIDENT said:

SENATORS: I have been charged by the committee to whom you confided the arrangements of this day, with the duty of expressing some of the reflections that naturally occur in taking final leave of a Chamber which has so long been occupied by the Senate. In the progress of our country and the growth of the representation, this room has become too contracted for the representatives of the States now existing and soon to exist; and accordingly you are about to exchange it for a Hall affording accommodations adequate to the present and the future. The occasion suggests many interesting reminiscences; and it may be agreeable, in the first place, to occupy a few minutes with a short account of the various places at which Congress has assembled, of the struggles which preceded the permanent location of the seat of Government, and of the circumstances under which it was finally established on the banks of the Potomac.

The Congress of the Revolution was sometimes a fugitive, holding its sessions, as the chances of war required, at Philadelphia, Baltimore, Lancaster, Annapolis, and Yorktown. During the period between the conclusion of peace and the commencement of the present Government, it met at Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York.

After the idea of a permanent Union had been executed in part by the adoption of the Articles of Confederation, the question presented itself of fixing a seat of Government, and this immediately called forth intense interest and rivalry.

That the place should be central, having regard to the population and territory of the Confederacy, was the only point common to the contending parties. Propositions of all kinds were offered, debated, and rejected, sometimes with intemperate warmth. At length, on the 7th of October, 1783, the Congress being at Princeton, whither they had been driven from Philadelphia, by the insults of a body of armed men, it was resolved that a building for the use of Congress be erected near the falls of the Delaware. This was soon after modified by requiring suitable buildings to be also erected near the falls of the Potomac, that the residence of Congress might alternate between those places. But the question was not allowed to rest, and at length, after frequent and warm debates, it was resolved that the residence of Congress should continue at one place; and commissioners were appointed, with full power to lay out a district for a Federal town near the falls of the Delaware; and in the meantime Congress assembled alternately at Trenton and Annapolis, but the representatives of other States were unremitting in exertions for their respective localities.

On the 23d of December, 1784, it was resolved to remove to the city of New York, and to remain there until the building on the Delaware should be completed; and accordingly, on the 11th of January, 1785, the Congress met at New York, where they continued to hold their sessions until the Confederation gave place to the Constitution.

The Commissioners to lay out a town on the Delaware reported their proceedings to Congress; but no further steps were taken to carry the resolution into effect.

When the bonds of union were drawn closer by the organization of the new Government under the Constitution, on the 3d of March, 1789, the subject was revived, and discussed with greater warmth than before. It was conceded on all sides that the residence of Congress should continue at one place, and the prospect of stability in the Government invested the question with a deeper interest. Some members proposed New York, as being "superior to any place they knew for the orderly and decent behavior of its inhabitants." To this it was answered that it was not desirable that the political capital should be in a commercial metropolis. Others ridiculed the idea of building palaces in the woods. Mr. Gerry, of Massachusetts, thought it highly unreasonable to fix the seat of Government in such a position as to have nine States of the thirteen to the northward of the place; while the South Carolinians objected to Philadelphia on account of the number of Quakers, who, they said, continually annoyed the Southern members with schemes of emancipation:

In the midst of these disputes, the House of Representatives resolved, "that the permanent seat of Government ought to be at some convenient place on the banks of the Susquehanna." On the introduction of a bill to give effect to this resolution, much feeling was exhibited, especially by the southern members. Mr. Madison thought if the proceeding of that day had been foreseen by Virginia, that State might not have become a party to the Constitution. The question was allowed by every member to be a matter of great importance. Mr. Scott said the future tranquility and well-being of the United States depended as much on this as on any question that ever had, or could, come before Congress; and Mr. Fisher Ames remarked that every principle of pride, and honor, and even of patriotism, were engaged. For a time, any agreement appeared to be impossible; but the good genius of our system finally prevailed, and on the 28th of June, 1790, an act was passed containing the following clause:

"That a district of territory on the river Potomac, at some place between the mouths of the eastern branch and the Connogochague, be, and the same is hereby, accepted, for the permanent seat of the Government of the United States."

The same act provided that Congress should hold its sessions at Philadelphia until the first Monday in November, 1800, when the Government should remove to the District selected on the Potomac. Thus was settled a question which had produced much sectional feeling between the States. But all difficulties were not yet surmounted; for Congress, either from indifference, or the want of money, failed to make adequate appropriations for the erection of public buildings, and the commissioners were often reduced to great straits to maintain the progress of the work. Finding it impossible to borrow money in Europe, or to obtain it from Congress, Washington, in December, 1796, made a personal appeal to the Legislature of Maryland, which was responded to by an advance of \$100,000; but in so deplorable a condition was the credit of the Federal Government that the State required, as a guarantee of payment, the pledge of the private credit of the commissioners.

From the beginning Washington had advocated the present seat of Government. Its establishment here was due, in a large measure, to his influence; it was his wisdom and prudence that composed disputes and settled conflicting titles; and it was chiefly through his personal influence that the funds were provided to prepare the buildings for the reception of the President and Congress.

The wings of the Capitol having been sufficiently prepared, the Government removed to this District on the 17th of November, 1800; or, as Mr. Wolcott

expressed it, left the comforts of Philadelphia "to go to the Indian place with the long name, in the woods on the Potomac." I will not pause to describe the appearance, at that day, of the place where the city was to be. Cotemporary accounts represent it as desolate in the extreme, with its long, unopened avenues and streets, its deep morasses, and its vast area covered with trees instead of houses. It is enough to say that Washington projected the whole plan upon a scale of centuries, and that time enough remains to fill the measure of his great conception.

The Senate continued to occupy the north wing, and the House of Representatives the south wing of the Capitol, until the 24th of August, 1814, when the British army entered the city and burned the public buildings. This occurred during the recess, and the President immediately convened the Congress. Both houses met in a brick building known as Blodget's Hotel, which occupied a part of the square now covered by the General Post Office. But the accommodations in that house being quite insufficient, a number of public-spirited citizens erected a more commodious building, on Capitol Hill, and tendered it to Congress; the offer was accepted, and both Houses continued to occupy it until the wings of the new Capitol were completed. This building yet stands on the street opposite to the northeastern corner of the Capitol Square, and has since been occasionally occupied by persons employed in different branches of the public service.

On the 6th of December, 1819, the Senate assembled for the first time in this Chamber, which has been the theater of their deliberations for more than thirty-nine years.

And now the strifes and uncertainties of the past are finished. We see around us on every side the proofs of stability and improvement. The Capitol is worthy of the Republic. Noble public buildings meet the view on every hand. Treasures of science and the arts begin to accumulate. As this flourishing city enlarges, it testifies to the wisdom and forecast that dictated the plan of it. Future generations will not be disturbed with questions concerning the center of population, or of territory, since the steamboat, the railroad, and the telegraph have made communication almost instantaneous. The spot is sacred by a thousand memories, which are so many pledges that the city of Washington, founded by him, and bearing his revered name, with its beautiful site, bounded by picturesque eminences, and the broad Potomac, and lying within view of his home and his tomb, shall remain forever the political capital of the United States.

It would be interesting to note the gradual changes which have occurred in the practical working of the Government since the adoption of the Constitution; and it may be appropriate to this occasion to remark one of the most striking of them.

At the origin of the Government, the Senate seemed to be regarded chiefly as an executive council. The President often visited the Chamber, and conferred personally with this body; most of its business was transacted with closed doors, and it took comparatively little part in the legislative debates. The rising and vigorous intellects of the country sought the arena of the House of Representatives as the appropriate theater for the display of their powers. Mr. Madison observed, on some occasion, that being a young man, and desiring to increase his reputation, he could not afford to enter the Senate; and it will be remembered that, so late as 1812, the great debates which preceded the war and aroused the country to the assertion of its rights, took place in the other branch of Congress. To such an extent was the idea of seclusion carried, that when this Chamber was completed, no seats were prepared for the accommodation of the public; and it was not until many years afterwards that the semi-

circular gallery was erected which admits the people to be witnesses of your proceedings. But now, the Senate, besides its peculiar relations to the executive department of the Government, assumes its full share of duty as a coequal branch of the Legislature; indeed, from the limited number of its members, and for other obvious reasons, the most important questions, especially of foreign policy, are apt to pass first under discussion in this body,—and to be a member of it, is justly regarded as one of the highest honors which can be conferred on an American statesman.

It is scarcely necessary to point out the causes of this change, or to say that it is a concession both to the importance and individuality of the States, and to the free and open character of the Government.

In connection with this easy but thorough transition, it is worthy of remark, that it has been effected without a charge from any quarter that the Senate has transcended its constitutional sphere—a tribute at once to the moderation of the Senate, and another proof to thoughtful men of the comprehensive wisdom with which the framers of the Constitution secured essential principles without inconveniently embarrassing the action of the Government.

The progress of this popular movement, in one aspect of it, has been steady and marked. At the origin of the Government no arrangements in the Senate were made for spectators; in this Chamber about one-third of the space is allotted to the public; and in the new apartment the galleries cover two-thirds of its area. In all free countries the admission of the people to witness legislative proceedings is an essential element of public confidence; and it is not to be anticipated that this wholesome principle will ever be abused by the substitution of partial and interested demonstrations for the expression of a matured and enlightened public opinion. Yet it should never be forgotten that not France, but the turbulent spectators within the Hall, awed and controlled the French Assembly. With this lesson, and its consequences before us, the time will never come when the deliberations of the Senate shall be swayed by the blandishments or the thunders of the galleri

It is impossible to disconnect from an occasion like this, a crowd of reflections on our past history, and of speculations on the future. The most meagre account of the Senate involves a summary of the progress of our country. From year to year you have seen your representation enlarge; again and again you have proudly welcomed a new sister into the Confederacy; and the occurrences of this day are a material and impressive proof of the growth and prosperity of the United States. Three periods in the history of the Senate mark, in striking contrast, three epochs in the history of the Union.

On the 3d of March, 1789, when the Government was organized under the Constitution, the Senate was composed of the representatives of eleven States, containing three millions of people.

On the 6th of December, 1819, when the Senate met for the first time in this room, it was composed of the representatives of twenty-one States, containing nine millions of people.

To-day it is composed of the representatives of thirty-two States, containing more than twenty-eight millions of people, prosperous, happy, and still devoted to constitutional liberty. Let these great facts speak for themselves to all the world.

The career of the United States cannot be measured by that of any other people of whom history gives account; and the mind is almost appalled at the contemplation of the prodigious force which has marked their progress. Sixty-nine years ago, thirteen States, containing three millions of inhabitants, burdened with debt, and exhausted by the long war of independence, established for their common good a free Constitution, on principle new to mankind, and began

their experiment with the good wishes of a few doubting friends and the derision of the world. Look at the result to-day ; twenty-eight millions of people, in every way happier than an equal number in any other part of the globe! the center of population and political power descending the western slopes of the Alleghany mountains, and the original thirteen States forming but the eastern margin on the map of our vast possessions. See besides, Christianity, civilization, and the arts given to a continent; the despised colonies grown into a Power of the first class, representing and protecting ideas that involve the progress of the human race; a commerce greater than that of any other nation; free interchange between the States; every variety of climate, soil, and production, to make a people powerful and happy—in a word, behold present greatness, and, in the future, an empire to which the ancient mistress of the world in the height of her glory could not be compared. Such is our country; ay, and more—far more than my mind could conceive or my tongue could utter. Is there an American who regrets the past? Is there one who will deride his country's laws, pervert her Constitution, or alienate her people? If there be such a man, let his memory descend to posterity laden with the execrations of all mankind.

So happy is the political and social condition of the United States, and so accustomed are we to the secure enjoyment of a freedom elsewhere unknown, that we are apt to undervalue the treasures we possess, and to lose, in some degree, the sense of obligation to our forefathers. But when the strifes of faction shake the Government, and even threaten it, we may pause with advantage long enough to remember that we are reaping the reward of other men's labors. This liberty we inherit; this admirable Constitution, which has survived peace and war, prosperity and adversity; this double scheme of Government, State and Federal, so peculiar and so little understood by other Powers, yet which protects the earnings of industry, and makes the largest personal freedom compatible with public order; these great results were not achieved without wisdom and toil and blood—the touching and heroic record is before the world. But to all this we were born, and, like heirs upon whom has been cast a great inheritance, have only the high duty to preserve, to extend, and to adorn it. The grand productions of the era in which the foundations of this Government were laid, reveal the deep sense its founders had of their obligations to the whole family of man. Let us never forget that the responsibilities imposed on this generation are by so much the greater than those which rested on our revolutionary ancestors, as the population, extent, and power of our country surpass the dawning promise of its origin.

It would be a pleasing task to pursue many trains of thought, not wholly foreign to this occasion, but the temptation to enter the wide field must be rigorously curbed; yet I may be pardoned, perhaps, for one or two additional reflections.

The Senate is assembled for the last time in this Chamber. Henceforth it will be converted to other uses; yet it must remain forever connected with great events, and sacred to the memories of the departed orators and statesmen who here engaged in high debates, and shaped the policy of their country. Hereafter the American, and the stranger, as they wander through the Capitol, will turn with instinctive reverence to view the spot on which so many and great materials have accumulated for history. They will recall the images of the great and the good, whose renown is the common property of the Union; and chiefly, perhaps, they will linger around the seats once occupied by the mighty three, whose names and fame, associated in life, death has not been able to sever; illustrious men, who in their generation sometimes divided, sometimes

led, and sometimes resisted public opinion—for they were of that higher class of statesmen who seek the right and follow their convictions.

There sat CALHOUN, the Senator, inflexible, austere, oppressed, but not overwhelmed by his deep sense of the importance of his public functions; seeking the truth, then fearlessly following it—a man whose unsparing intellect compelled all his emotions to harmonize with the deductions of his rigorous logic, and whose noble countenance habitually wore the expression of one engaged in the performance of high public duties.

This was WEBSTER's seat. He too was every inch a Senator. Conscious of his own vast powers, he reposed with confidence on himself; and scorning the contrivances of smaller men, he stood among his peers all the greater for the simple dignity of his senatorial demeanor. Type of his northern home, he rises before the imagination, in the grand and granite outline of his form and intellect, like a great New England rock, repelling a New England wave. As a writer, his productions will be cherished by statesmen and scholars while the English tongue is spoken. As a senatorial orator, his great efforts are historically associated with this Chamber, whose very air seems to vibrate beneath the strokes of his deep tones and his weighty words.

On the outer circle sat HENRY CLAY, with his impetuous and ardent nature untamed by age, and exhibiting in the Senate the same vehement patriotism and passionate eloquence that of yore electrified the House of Representatives and the country. His extraordinary personal endowments, his courage, all his noble qualities, invested him with an individuality and a charm of character which, in any age, would have made him a favorite of history. He loved his country above all earthly objects. He loved liberty in all countries. Illustrious man!—orator, patriot, philanthropist—whose light, at its meridian, was seen and felt in the remotest parts of the civilized world; and whose declining sun, as it hastened down the west, threw back its level beams, in hues of mellowed splendor, to illuminate and to cheer the land he loved and served so well.

All the States may point, with gratified pride, to the services in the Senate of their patriotic sons. Crowding the memory, come the names of Adams, Hayne, Wright, Mason, Otis, Macon, Pinckney, and the rest—I cannot number them—who, in the record of their acts and utterances, appeal to their successors to give the Union a destiny not unworthy of the past. What models were these, to awaken emulation or to plunge in despair! Fortunate will be the American statesmen who, in this age, or in succeeding times, shall contribute to invest the new Hall to which we go, with historic memories like those which cluster here.

And now, Senators, we leave this memorable Chamber, bearing with us, unimpaired the Constitution we received from our forefathers. Let us cherish it with grateful acknowledgments to the Divine Power who controls the destinies of empires and whose goodness we adore. The structures reared by men yield to the corroding tooth of time. These marble walls must molder into ruin; but the principles of constitutional liberty, guarded by wisdom and virtue, unlike material elements, do not decay. Let us devoutly trust that another Senate, in another age, shall bear to a new and larger Chamber, this Constitution vigorous and inviolate, and that the last generation of posterity shall witness the deliberations of the Representatives of American States still united, prosperous, and free.